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GEORGES SIMENON

Les Nouvelles
Enquêtes du
COMMISSAIRE
MAIGRET

CEUX

DU

GRAND CAFÉ



Ceux du Grand Café

by Georges Simenon

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The Group at the *Grand Café*

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CHAPTER ONE

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It had started that winter. As soon as it got dark, Maigret didn't know what to do with himself. He had barely amused himself for a month turning the knobs of his wireless, and it didn't take him but half an hour to read his three newspapers. Then he'd desert the dining room, his usual lair, and make a small tour of the kitchen.

"Haven't you finished yet?" he'd ask his wife. "What are you doing?"

He came back, left, came back again, incapable of understanding what kind of work could keep a woman in the kitchen all day long, to the extent that Mme Maigret had finally said to him one day, "You don't know what to do with your great big self. Why don't you go down to the *Grand Café* and play cards with them?"

Maigret had resisted for weeks, nearly months. Certainly, he knew everybody in Meung-sur-Loire, where he had retired to. He was not ashamed to be retired, to cultivate his garden and to tinker close to his cabin at the edge of the river. He sometimes entered the *Grand Café* — quite modern, close to the bridge — to drink a *demi* there, or on occasion, an aperitif with water.

The fact remains that it was for him, in his heart of hearts, a kind of defeat, the day when, at the insistence of Mme Maigret, he settled himself before the green baize of the card table, and asked like a beginner, "How much do we play for?"

"Drinks, as usual. Shrewd as you are, you shouldn't have to take your wallet out often."

He had decided to play just once. But the following day, they sent a boy to tell him that they were waiting for him.

Gradually, he adopted the special vocabulary of his partners, became part of their free-masonry and, strictly speaking, one of the group at the *Grand Café*, of whom Angèle never asked what they took, as she knew in advance; one of those who, as they marked the score, didn't fail to sigh, "Well, Angèle! Won't you stand us to a round? Don't be so stingy!" And after all it was hard to say whether she enjoyed the constant teasing or not.

That winter, when there was mud on the paths, Maigret didn't mind putting on his varnished boots to go to the bridge, and at the time of the

grape harvest and for another month after that, they drank half bottles of new white wine. December and January, and sometimes February, saw grog and hot wine, and spring called forth anise aperitifs, which were replaced, in summer, by the fresh light white country wines...

"Thirty six..."

"If you say thirty six, you've got forty... I say *misère*."

"Forty-one..."

"With what?" The three others addressed each other as *tu*, used their first names or more often their profession.

"To you, Butcher!" The butcher came there in his work clothes, his apron sometimes spattered with blood. He lost more often than the others, was often bawled out for his mistakes and paid up without ever grumbling, seemingly happy to be allowed into this holy-of-holies, this favored band which constituted the cream of Meung-sur-Loire. Sometimes his son came to call him when a customer required his presence opposite, at the red-painted gates of his shop, at which time he always found a neighbor to hold his cards, and from which he usually profited by adding points to his score, or making a joke.

"To you, Citroën!" He was the mechanic, who played seriously and always won, but who was relentless when a partner made a mistake in his play. The third who could be called one of the principal pillars was Maigret, whom everyone called 'Superintendent' and with whom they only joked timidly. As for the fourth, it varied. When the mayor, who was a veterinarian, didn't come, it was Urbain, the owner of the *Grand Café*, who took his place, unless the blacksmith happened to be there. By five to five, one could be sure that the butcher was on the threshold of his shop, awaiting the signal. Maigret would arrive, puffing his pipe, his hands deep in his pockets. Opposite the *Grand Café*, there was another, the *Commerce*, narrower and darker, which made it a second-class establishment not worthy of note.

"Go get your father, little one. Tell him we're waiting for him." And the son of the blacksmith, the mechanic or the veterinary surgeon left his comrades for a moment to go shout at his door, "Papa! It's the group at the *Grand Café*..."

"Tell them I'm coming!"

A little politics, of course, but only after the game, when it finished early, or when the butcher won and they called him a "fascist."

As for the women, they were nothing to speak of. The wife of the owner, Mme Urbain, was pale and sad like a leek, always occupied with her intestinal disorders and her heaps of medicines, and sharing the information with whomever she could find, none of whom found it the slightest bit interesting.

Which left Angèle, the waitress, who was twenty.

"A real piece," the mechanic had whispered to Maigret, "but Urbain keeps his eye on her..."

"Ah! He's..."

"Too bad!"

Was it true or not? Maigret hadn't paid particular attention and hadn't shared the mechanic's opinion of Angèle, finding her a little pushy and not particularly frank. But undoubtedly the others were more interested in the contents of her blouse, which was particularly well-filled.

During the game, people entered, drank a glass, sat down for a spell behind the players, shook their heads, approved or disapproved of a play, but they were all of little account.

The real 'group at the *Grand Café*' were those four or five of the card table, those for whom, after 4:30, the table was wiped, and for whom, every two weeks, a new deck with gilded corners was bought, since Maigret had once noticed that the cards were sticking.

Was it possible to imagine that there could be, in this set of which there could hardly exist a more peaceful in the French provinces, a drama which could concern Maigret, professionally, not peripherally, as in an accidental and more or less remote way, but literally at his side? And can you imagine his situation, the former superintendent of the P.J., when the news was hawked by all the town that, "One of the group at the *Grand Café* is a killer!"

It was in April, when the game started with the sun in the street and on the bridge, and finished in darkness...

It was surely at the beginning of the month, for the butcher had gone the day before to the Vendée and had returned the very same day. Once a month he went over to Luçon. He had explained — and Maigret was not particularly interested in these affairs of the butcher — that he rented some marshes in the Vendée, and there he grazed animals that he had bought thin...

He always went in his van, and he always wore a hunting outfit, brown leather spats and corduroy breeches with his butcher's blouse.

It is only afterwards that the smallest details came back to mind, for at the time there was no reason to think anything of it, considering that it was an evening like any other, with its sunset on the sands of the Loire. But Maigret remembered later that he had thought, "Curious that he didn't stop for a moment at his place..."

For from the windows of the *Grand Café*, one could see, almost directly opposite, the gate and marble walls of the butcher shop, where the butcher had not stopped at all. It was at the time of anise aperitifs, which Angèle had brought for everyone without being asked, except for the blacksmith, who drank *Vittel-fraise* all the year round.

The veterinarian, a small, bearded man with a mustache, was always fidgeting, a complainer when he lost and bawdy when the conversation fell to women. He was the only one to make lewd proposals to Angèle, in a loud voice, and seemingly confirming the thesis of the blacksmith: Maigret had noticed that at those times, Urbain, if too much a businessman to say anything, darkened noticeably.

Anyway, the game had been formed, with some hesitations.

"Play!" said the veterinarian mayor to Urbain.

"Not on your life! You play!" the owner of the *Grand Café* answered. There was an old wireless to which no one paid any attention, so much did it form part of the atmosphere.

Urbain's two-year-old crawled close to the stove where Mme Urbain, more constipated than ever, embroidered a cushion for her living room, where nobody ever set foot.

"Thirty six..."

"Thirty seven..."

"Fifty six..."

The rays of the setting sun illuminated the russet-red hairs on the face of the veterinarian-mayor, and Maigret thought that the little man would make an extremely presentable faun. "If he were a doctor, I wouldn't send my wife to him." he thought to himself.

At his side was the butcher, silent and undoubtedly tired from his voyage, for this morning the weather had been bad. Moreover, he was worried and

didn't hide it long. "I have to see the notary..." he had announced while playing.

"This evening?" asked the blacksmith, whose skin was spotted with black. "You think he'll wait for you?"

"I'll ring at his house. I've done it before. I don't like to keep large sums at home."

"That was crafty! If you'd played the seven of hearts instead of the ace of clubs, I would have thrown my ten of diamonds and it would have been all over... Angèle!"

She came over. No one gave it a thought.

"Bring me an ice floe, won't you?"

Urbain had sat just behind Maigret, as he usually did, and after watching two plays, he couldn't help shaking his head in disapproval.

"Stop giving things away!"

"Never, Mister Mayor..."

Had they only heard the butcher's words? Gradually, as chips accumulated in front of the players, (for the rounds had to be paid, like any other evening), the air became blue, and finally the lamps were lit. The street on the other side of the panes was no more than a black hole behind which the bulb of the butcher shop shone.

"What do you want with the notary? You still thinking of buying Jules' house?"

"Why? You want to buy it yourself?"

"Not me... But I know somebody..."

Maigret, who already knew about it, wasn't interested in the conversation. He had his heart set on making one successful *misère sur table*.

"You know what the Belgian wants to do?"

"Someone told me... A cinema!"

"Are we playing or what?," protested the blacksmith, who had announced forty-six.

"*Misère sur table!*" finally risked Maigret. He made it! It was the first time he'd been able to do it in months! "Mark yourselves five..." he told the others.

"Are you really the buyer?" insisted the veterinarian.

"Why, no..." sighed the butcher with a certain embarrassment.

"I should be told. I promised the Belgian that nobody would bid on it. It's in the interest of everyone to have a cinema..."

The play began again. Maigret thought he saw the pharmacist and the doctor come in, probably going to play billiards in the back room — they never dawdled with the card players.

"Twenty six!"

"If you pass, I pass..."

He threw in his cards. Angèle served the second round, for it was their ritual to drink two rounds after two games had been played. Why did the superintendent look at Urbain just at the moment when Angèle had leaned over at the head of the table? And why had Urbain seemed sad, as after a lovers' quarrel?

Parbleu! he said himself. Yesterday was Angèle's day off, and she'd gone to Orléans again. If she really was his lover, he must be jealous of these weekly trips...

The cards were dealt. There was no time to think about it. Then the taste of the anise aperitif and pipe after pipe... Wasn't it admirable how Mme Maigret didn't need anyone else to make herself happy and could spend her whole day in the kitchen or linen room, with only her thoughts! But did she really think about anything?

Enough! No reason to be mean. But there were days like this, when the atmosphere of the *Grand Café* was particularly dull and when he felt like a dog on a chain. Was it to come to play with these good imbeciles that he had left the Quai des Orfèvres? They never gave him five minutes respite, for if he were late, that odious kid with the sharp voice — the veterinarian's son, redheaded like his father — came to shout at the garden gate:

"The group at the *Grand Café* is waiting! Come on!"

He had nothing left to play. He never did! Besides his *misère sur table*...

"What is it?" Urbain asked his wife, who had called him.

He went over to her and they talked in a low voice. Maigret thought that poor Urbain had married a rather unpleasant woman, and that his affair with Angèle, if it really existed, couldn't always be such a pleasure.

That's life! If you looked at things through the small end of the glasses, in the countryside, whether on the Loire, the Cher or the Rhone, there'd only be minor changes of details.

Had they been in the Midi, Maigret would have played bowls, or in Lille, skittles...

"You lost, so go ahead!" said the mayor, rising and stroking his mustache, which was always damp like a spaniel's. As for the exact order of their departure... The butcher and Maigret were the two losers. The former superintendent had approached the counter, where he had counted his change and given a franc to Angèle as a tip. The others left only ten sous, but since he had gotten into the habit of it, so much the worse. Just one small detail, however... The butcher, when he had gone to pay, had taken out his wallet and mumbled while making a big show of how stuffed it was, overflowing with thousand franc notes, "You can see I have to go and visit the notary."

The doctor and the pharmacist, both young, one blond, the other brown-haired, played their billiards, and later in the evening met with their wives for bridge.

"Good night, Superintendent!"

"Good night everyone!"

And after that?

Maigret walked down the dark street, hands in his pockets. There was still a light in the grocery, but the lamps in the windows had been extinguished. He would go down the street to the third gas lamp, then turn to the right. He was just about there when the butcher's car passed, stopped, and waited. It was total unprecedented. The former superintendent assumed that the other had something to tell him.

"Do you think I can stop in at the notary's when his office is closed?"

"Well I'd certainly think so, seeing as he knows you..."

"I'll be off then! Good evening..."

Maigret would remember it. The body of the van was painted a speckled green. He watched the tail-lights moving off into the darkness.

He himself turned to the right, as usual, and before long was pushing open his door with a familiar gesture and sniffing, as he did each evening, the odors of the kitchen. There was wild rabbit, a rare thing at that time: a landowner at Cléry had had a drive the day before to destroy some hundreds of rabbits which had been causing serious damage.

"Did you win?"

"I lost."

"Don't you think you lose more often than you should? Are you sure the others don't cheat?" Honest Mme Maigret, who was wary even of the group at the *Grand Café*!

"If you consider that it costs me exactly four francs fifty for an evening..."

"Well, if you're enjoying yourself for your money..."

Actually, he didn't exactly enjoy himself, but he couldn't have explained it to her. It had become a passion, a need, when you came right down to it, a need which had a regular schedule, and of which he was not far from feeling shame, like a cocaine addict or an inveterate drunkard.

"What do they say?"

"Nothing. When we play, we hardly speak..."

"You know what someone told me?"

"How would I know?"

"That Angèle, the little maid at the café, had got pregnant, and that she'd got rid of it."

"I didn't notice anything."

"Of course not! It was hardly three months. She told the pharmacist's maid who..."

After the wild rabbit and the almond tart (one of Mme Maigret's specialties), the local newspaper and the Paris newspaper, his same armchair for three years already, close to the stove, even though it was summer and not lit...

Suddenly, like a thunder clap in the sky, an invasion of the lane, voices, knocks on the door, where someone rattled the clapper.

"Superintendent! Quickly! Superintendent!"

It was the blacksmith, the one who only drank *Vittel-fraise*, and who at this moment seemed drunk. He was accompanied by people who Maigret knew on sight, and by children threading between the legs of the grownups.

"Someone's killed the butcher!"

"What?"

"You have to come. The mayor's calling the gendarmerie..."

"His van was found at the edge of the road, with a burst tire. As for him, he had a bullet in the chest."

"But where? Where did it happen?"

"Just outside of Meung. Surely just a few minutes after he left us. It was the coal merchant, passing in his truck, who noticed the car, the headlights still lit. He brought the butcher back to his place..."

Obviously! In other words, everything had already been moved. But before he found himself getting annoyed, he had a sudden fit of rebellion.

"This has nothing to do with me... You say that someone has notified the gendarmerie?"

"But don't you understand?"

"Don't I understand what?"

"Remember what he told us this evening, what he had in his pocket? They'll say... someone will claim... *Parbleu!* It has to be one of the group at the *Grand Café*, it's inevitable! And there aren't that many of us!"

"When was the last time you saw him yourself?" asked the smith.

"Almost at the crossroad. He stopped for a moment..."

"He spoke to you?"

"He spoke to me..."

No! Not that! It was bad enough that a crime had been committed in Maigret's immediate circle, without starting by suspecting him!

"You'd better come... Everyone is running around... His wife claims that it was a trap..."

"What, a trap?"

"She didn't explain..."

Maigret looked for his hat and, since he couldn't find the old felt which he adopted in the countryside, he wore his bowler, which had a certain symbolism to it.

"I'll be back soon!" he promised his wife, just as he had in the past, when he'd left for an investigation which sometimes kept him away as long as eight days. She understood and reminded him, "Don't forget your key..."

"I won't need it. I'll be back soon."

It was idiotic, going out like this into the street with the blacksmith to his left and ten or fifteen of the curious around, not counting the kids, among whom the better informed explained, "He's an old policeman. He'll investigate... You'll see!"

In the main street, there were shadows on the pavements, on the thresholds, a gathering opposite the butcher's, the *Grand Café*.

"Look!"

Now the gendarmes were arriving... three of them, by motor bike and side-car, strong in their uniforms. They stepped with self-assurance into the midst of the gawkers.

CHAPTER TWO

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Mme Maigret didn't understand. Already she'd been astonished when she'd seen him returning hardly half an hour after someone had come to get him.

"What are you doing? Is it finished?"

"No. But I'm not interested." He was in a bad mood, grouchy. He turned the dial of the wireless without interest.

"Someone killed him to rob him?" asked Mme Maigret, occupied with her sewing.

"His money disappeared, yes."

"He was carrying a lot?"

"So it appears..." She thought that Maigret was struck by the dramatic end of a comrade with whom, a few moments earlier, he'd been playing cards. And there was that, of course. But there was also something the former superintendent had a presentiment of...

Just a little while ago, the people in the *Grand Café*, the curious, everyone, all things considered, had been amazed to hear him declare, not as somebody who wants to be persuaded, but like a man making a resolution, "I will have nothing to do with this affair."

They were still talking about it there. No doubt they were waiting for the superintendent of the mobile Brigade of Orléans. Maigret knew nothing about it, and didn't want to know anything. He went to bed before ten, came down around eight in the morning, in slippers, unshaven, and poured a bowl of coffee.

"You're not going to get the news?"

"No!" He was satisfied to take the local newspaper, in the box with the mail.

"...the game finished, between notables of our locality... among others our distinguished mayor... Superintendent Maigret, one of the aces of the Criminal Investigation Department..."

And the good words for each one:

"...the *Grand Café*, which is the place of meeting for the select of our city... the victim, of whom everyone appreciated his honesty and devotion... the gendarmerie, under the direction of the very distinguished lieutenant de Velpeau... the arrival from the Central of Superintendent Gabrielli, whose flair and perspicacity... Doctor Dubois, always at the breach when necessary..."

"Anything new?" Mme Maigret questioned. Neither new, nor old! All of it nothing! A column to explain that the butcher had been killed with he and his van not more than a hundred meters from the notary's house.

He'd received a bullet in the chest after his car had been stopped by bursting a tire. That was all. His empty wallet had been found in his pocket. The large-caliber revolver had been found at the edge of the road.

Seeing Maigret moving towards his fishing hut, his wife was astonished:

"You're going fishing? But what if, during this time, someone..." She wanted to say, "... if someone needs you..." And, at exactly that moment, someone lifted the knocker of the door. Maigret groaned, all the more since he had recognized the butcher's wife, who already wore a black dress, though not yet of crepe. Mme Maigret led her into the dining room, and came to seek her husband.

"She wants to speak to you... You should put on your other slippers... Those are so old and worn out..."

The butcher's wife waited until the door was closed again, coughed, wiped her nose with her handkerchief, looked at Maigret with the instinctive mistrust of a merchant.

"I came to ask your council..." she began. "I know that you were a friend of my husband... I suppose that he made certain confidences to you..."

"No, Madam. I promise you that your husband never confided in me about anything."

"Really! But seeing him every day, you couldn't avoid noticing..."

"There is no reason to continue, Madam. I swear you that I did not observe your husband. We played cards, that is exact, but that was the limit of our intimacy..."

"You don't want to tell me? That's it, isn't it? And if you realize that I am well-informed? And not since today, nor since yesterday, you can believe it! He was absolutely crazy about that girl! I saw him changing before my very eyes. Yes! In the end, he had no control left, even with our son, down with

influenza, so that last Sunday, he beat him for less than nothing, such as he'd become..."

"I'm sorry, Madam..."

"Let me finish... I could have made scenes, could have prevented him from going to the café to see that girl... I preferred to mope in my corner, with the hope that it would pass. Monday, I saw Angèle leaving for Orléans and I was sure that my husband's van was not far behind, that he would return that evening in a better mood than other days... I thus came to ask you..."

"I repeat, Madam, that I know nothing, absolutely nothing, and that I want to know nothing. The police force has opened an investigation. The Prosecutor's office should be arriving this morning..."

"They've already come."

"In that case, you see that..." He could put her off brutally and she still clung to God knows what hope...

"I would have believed that in circumstances like these..."

"But, Madam, please understand that I am impotent, that there is an official police force, that the investigation will follow its course and that it will succeed where it must succeed..." When he could finally close the door again, he noted, "And now there is one more enemy!"

"Why do you refuse to involve yourself in this? I can understand a little, myself, this woman..."

Too bad! He himself understood and returned to the bottom of his garden, not with the idea of fishing, but simply to arrange his lines. He didn't have to go to town to know what was happening there. He could imagine the butcher's wife returning, passing through groups of the curious; the comings and goings in the *Grand Café* opposite, which would never be empty all day long.

And on top of it all it was market day, the street jammed with peasants' carts, calves at the end of tethers, women carrying poultry by the legs...

The butcher was dead! His family arrived from Amboise, where he came from. Red eyes, wet kisses, an odor of flowers and burned wax, and children they didn't know what to do with on a day like this, as they didn't dare send them out to play in the street.

At the sound of the door knocker, Maigret merely raised his head, threw a glance at the door of the hut and sighed.

"Next!"

For they would all come, he was certain of it! He would have been better off to have gone fishing and spent the day in his skiff at the edge of the current. Otherwise, how could he prevent them from making confidences which he didn't want to hear? This time it was the mayor, whom Maigret did not accept in the dining room, but in his hut, where at least he could be occupied while listening.

"I thought we would have seen you this morning," said the small man, "and thinking you might be unwell, I came by to see how you were..."

No doubt! What did he want to talk about, this one? Was he going to speak about the loves of the butcher too?

"Of course, since yesterday evening, you must have been troubled... Don't deny it, Superintendent! A man like yourself, not being able to take part in a drama like this, voluntarily or not, he seeks to solve certain problems... It's like me when I'm in front of an animal. With my knowledge, I make my diagnosis... By the way, you know Michel, the son of the blacksmith?"

Maigret meticulously leaved the bottom of a line, acting even more preoccupied than usual.

"As mayor, I've had some worries about him several times... I suppose that professional secrecy doesn't apply between us?"

"But yes, it does!" contradicted Maigret seriously.

"Anyway, I can tell you, since everyone knows about it, that he's a hothead, and his father has had all sorts of troubles with him. He's now twenty-three and he still hasn't done anything serious with his life. Well, he's been in Meung for several days. It appears that in Paris he was unemployed. I have to mention "Anyway, I can tell you, since everyone knows about it, that he's a hothead, and his father has had all sorts of troubles with him. He's now twenty-three and he still hasn't done anything serious with his life. Well, he's been in Meung for several days. It appears that in Paris he was unemployed. I have to mention that he was once arrested for aggravated assault. And on top of that..."

"Goodbye, Mister Mayor..."

"Admit that you're not thinking of your lines at this moment, but that your spirit..."

And what? Was it because this Michel had once pulled a knife, on a holiday in the country, that he had gone on to kill the butcher on the road?

Even more curious was that left alone for half an hour, Maigret, without really wanting to at all, found himself literally watching the knocker of the door. He was like those children who refuse to play with the others, but who cannot stop themselves from enviously watching their frolicking.

Why wasn't he there now, at the *Grand Café*, like everyone else? And why this comedy, why this pretending to be furious whenever someone brought him some news?

It was close to midday when another one came, and this time, the commissioner had in front of him a man whom he believed he knew but couldn't manage to remember.

"We worked together once, on a business of forged passports. I was just a simple inspector then. Allow me to present to myself, Superintendent Gabrielli..."

"Delighted. A little white? Sit in the sun — It's not warm enough yet to stay in the shade..."

"I'd expected to meet you on the scene, but I was told that you'd savagely locked yourself up on your premises. What's this about! Don't you find it curious, this story? All morning I proceeded with interrogations. But all I could learn was that the butcher was in love with Angèle, the maid at the *Grand Café*... I got that right from the start. She was a girl who'd had an extremely unhappy childhood, for her father was the worst sort of drunkard. It occurred to me that this girl might have suspicious contacts... She could have had a young hooligan-like lover and..."

"To your health!"

"Am I annoying you? Obviously, you who were present, you know all that..."

"I assure you," sighed Maigret, "that I know absolutely nothing. The butcher is dead, and I regret it, like everyone else..."

"You have a funny way of putting it..."

"A cigar? A pipe of tobacco?"

"All right! I can see that you don't want to talk about it. When I learned that you were here, I'd imagined that my task would be singularly facilitated..."

Mme Maigret, who came and went from the kitchen to the garden and the garden to the kitchen, where she had a *ragoût* on the fire, kept shooting anxious looks at her husband. She'd never seen him like this. He was a little like the Maigret of the bad days of autumn, when he was hatching a flu he didn't want to admit to.

"In short," concluded Gabrielli, "I haven't found out anything at all. I can neither suspect the mayor, nor you, nor the blacksmith! I've ordered various inquiries, such as for the revolver, but I don't count much on that, for it's an old weapon like those frequently found in the country. A vagrant? That's always what we say when we don't find anything, and so the gendarmes will pass an unpleasant quarter of an hour with each of the wanderers..."

He still hoped, expected, that Maigret would finally decide to open his mouth. But no, he didn't stumble, didn't even have the curiosity to raise questions!

Mme Maigret, however, came to his aid by coming to ask, "You'll have lunch with us, Superintendent? I have mutton stew and fresh asparagus that a relative sent from the Île de Ré..."

He would have had to have been quite daring to accept this invitation made in spite of the obvious grouchiness of Maigret, who, himself, was not overdoing the courtesy!

"Strange..." Gabrielli thought, leaving empty-handed. "Does he know something? Is it his age which makes him like that? The country life?"

And Mme Maigret, who seldom scolded her husband, allowed herself to declare, "You were hardly polite with that boy. I don't know what's the matter, but I was ashamed of you..."

He made no effort to answer, and poured himself a third glass of white wine.

Was this what he was waiting for since the morning, and was this waiting the cause of his bad mood? In any case, when he heard Angèle's voice asking Mme Maigret if the superintendent were at home, he rose, opened the door, pronounced at once, "Come by here... Come in... Close the door..." He had brought her into the dining room and had left his wife in the kitchen. He smoked his pipe, paced, indicated a chair to his visitor.

"I couldn't come earlier..." she started. "I hoped a little that you would come and that I would find a way to speak to you for a moment." She was calm. Now she seemed to await the questions that Maigret could not avoid

posing to her, but the superintendent scraped carefully at a small spot of paint which he had on his sleeve.

"The police haven't asked me anything. But I told myself that you, being from here, were no doubt fully-informed. And so I came so that you could tell me what to do..."

"In connection with what?"

"Why, with the butcher! You knew, didn't you, that he was chasing me? Even though that caused me the scenes on the part of Mr. Urbain nearly every day. Mondays, he had the habit of watching for me in Orléans. He wasn't a malicious man. Sometimes he even cried in front of me, which is what made me yield..."

God knows that Maigret didn't encourage her to continue her confidences! And yet nothing stopped Angèle, who felt the need to give details.

"Mr. Urbain knew that I had twice gone to the hotel with the butcher. He told me that I had to choose... I was in a horrible position, for on his side, Hubert (the butcher) wanted to leave his wife, his trade, his kid to run away with me... What would you have done in my place?"

Did she really hope that he was going to answer? Wasn't it already enough that he was obliged to listen to all this?

"He'd already made up his mind several days ago. He wrote me several letters, swearing that he'd had enough, that he couldn't live like this any longer, that if I didn't leave with him, he'd kill himself. That's where the problem is, isn't it? This letter, where he speaks about suicide, it's from the day before yesterday. Do I have to tell that to the police? Do I have to tell them about Mr. Urbain, with the risk of... But they have to know that he killed himself..."

She didn't cry, was satisfied with a few small sniffles while looking at the ground with a sorry air.

"I thought you'd give me some advice. Mr. Urbain suspects something. He's been pestering me since this morning, asking what I'm going to do. He's so jealous that I'm always afraid he'll do something..."

Maigret began to empty his pipe into an ashtray. "I don't have anything to say to you..." he murmured after a long silence.

"You don't believe me? Do you think I'm making all this up? I've brought the letters, for just that reason..."

She took them from her bag, poor crumpled letters, written on shabby grocer's paper. Maigret indicated that he didn't want to see them.

"Read them! Now that he's dead, it doesn't matter any more."

"It's not worth while."

"You don't want to believe that he committed suicide?"

"It doesn't matter!"

"You think that he was killed during a robbery? Tell me! What do you think?"

"I don't think anything, my poor Angèle..."

"Why do you say 'poor'?"

"For nothing! Excuse me for being unable to advise you. Do as you see fit. As they say, follow the voice of your conscience. For my part, I've already forgotten what you've told me.

She stood up, pale, nervous.

"I don't understand you."

"That's of no importance."

"One would think that you suspect me, whereas... Is it true? Do you suspect me of having killed the butcher?"

"You were in the café when he died, weren't you?"

"And if I hadn't been in the café, you would have thought..."

He sighed. The minutes, the seconds appeared interminable to him. He wondered whether he would manage to maintain until the end this placidity which everyone held against him.

"Please go, Angèle. That would be best. I don't know anything, and I don't want to know anything."

"All right!" She moved towards the door and left, very disconcerted, turning around once in the lane, thinking he was going to call her back. As for Mme Maigret, she asked with a slightly crafty air:

"Is it her?"

"Her what?"

"You understand very well what I want to say..."

"Not at all!"

"At least acknowledge that there's a reason you're acting the way you are today. I certainly know you long enough to recognize that you're not in your normal state. Ever since yesterday evening, when you returned..."

"What did I do?"

"Nothing! But you had this head! Something was annoying you or worrying you..."

"It is rather natural, isn't it?"

"That you don't go out, like everyone else? You don't usually stay here all day..."

"I don't want everyone talking to me about the butcher..."

"About the butcher, or this girl?"

"Idiot!"

"Thank you!"

They'd managed to argue, actually, which they hadn't done for years. Maigret turned round and round in the house like a sick animal.

"When's the funeral?" his wife asked him, as he arranged old newspapers.

"I don't know."

"You'll go?"

"I suppose I'll have to..."

"You don't want to tell me why the girl came?"

"No!"

"You're still waiting for everyone?"

"I'd really like it better if they didn't come at all. Unfortunately, they will. They're all crazy to tell me their secrets..."

"That doesn't usually bother you. You don't think it would be better if you shaved?"

He shaved, out of idleness, changed his clothes and slippers. He wasn't completely ready when the knocker announced a new visitor. He leaned on the banister, recognized the voice of Urbain who said, "Don't disturb him... I'll wait. By the way, didn't my little maid Angèle come by?"

And this honest turkey of a Mme Maigret tried too hard, "I don't remember... Actually I don't know her on sight..."

"Small, thin, dressed in black..."

"I don't believe... No... But my husband can tell you more surely than I..."

Maigret shrugged his shoulders and even smiled a bit. He finished getting dressed, opened the window, took time to stuff a pipe and to look down at the Loire, flowing against the breeze which covered it with small wavelets. Finally, he decided to go down, penetrated the dining room, closed the door.

"Hello, Superintendent. Forgive me for disturbing you. But, if you've had a visit from Angèle, you must understand..." He was pale, his eyes creased with worry, his nervous hands pulling at the edge of his hat.

"Sit, please... A small white wine? You don't think anyone's waiting for you at your shop?"

The other shivered. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing... That it's market day... That you must be busy..."

"You also think..."

"What do I think?"

"That I killed the butcher?"

"I suppose that's impossible, since you were in your shop at the time..."

"No!" Urbain looked him in the eyes, challengingly, and Maigret responded in picking up his glass, "Then, that's even more tedious..."

CHAPTER THREE

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Frankly speaking, Maigret had never felt particularly sympathetic toward Urbain, but he would have had trouble giving the reason for it. The owner of the *Grand Café* carried out his trade of café owner, smiled or laughed with the customers, came running as soon as one needed him for a game. But was it his lack of spontaneity? Often, when he laughed at one of the mechanic's jokes, for example, one had somehow the impression that he would rather snap back, and sometimes you were surprised at his brief glances from which all trace of amenity was missing.

"That's the problem!" the former superintendent had said to himself. "Isn't it just the fact of a thirty-five-year-old man dragging all the day long in the sawdust of a provincial café?"

And here was this same Urbain, in Maigret's dining room, where, having expressed his inclinations of revolt, or maybe challenge, he was giving free rein to his emotions, forgetting any human decency, and after a grimace, bursting suddenly into tears.

"This is the first time that I've ever cried in front of a man," he thundered in a last attempt at decency. "But the situation is far too stupid! If this continues, I believe I'll wind up putting a bullet into my own head..."

It was one of those moments when, faced with a too great injustice of fate, you just want to stamp your feet.

"Why was it necessary that when you finished the game yesterday evening, I was taken with a fit of jealousy? Oh, I knew that Angèle had promised not to see *him* any more. From next week, she wasn't even going to go Orléans once a week anymore, I'd begged her so often. The fact remains that yesterday, to have stayed more than one hour close to the butcher, to think that he had... Have you never been jealous, you?"

Maigret was satisfied to nod his head with the bland indifference of a confessor.

"I couldn't take it any more. I went out the back way, as I sometimes do, and, for a quarter of an hour, I remained leaning on the parapet of the bridge, in the darkness..."

"You're sure that nobody saw you?"

"Even if someone had seen me, it was dark enough so they wouldn't have recognized me. A few minutes ago, when the Orléans superintendent asked me some questions, I realized that he suspected all the regulars at the café, but me more than the others. Tell me, will I have to explain everything? And must my wife learn about it, so that my home life, which is bad enough already, will become a total hell? That's what I came to ask you."

"I can't do without Angèle, you understand? I can't say how it started. Maybe in the beginning it was only curiosity. Then it became an obsession, so much so that now I suffer when customers look at her or pass very close to her. My wife, today, means nothing to me. I would leave her sooner than to lose Angèle. But I swear to you, Superintendent, that I didn't kill the butcher!"

"What must I do? How can I prove it? What will I say when I'm questioned and I can't provide an alibi! Who will believe me when I claim that I spent those angry minutes just leaning against the parapet of the bridge?"

"I didn't kill him, that's the truth! And what makes it all the worse is that I would have been able to, but not like that, from behind, on the road..."

"Answer me, do you believe me?"

Maigret felt the glow of his feverish glance, his anguish, and he turned his head.

"Tell me, do you believe me?"

"I can't answer you..."

"So, you don't believe me, you who know me! How will it be with those who don't know me?"

"Calm down, please."

"That's easy to say!" Urbain laughed.

"There's nothing to indicate that you should be worried. Superintendent Gabrielli came to see me a few moments ago and he spoke to me a little about you. His suspicions against one or the other among you are so vague that I think that in the final analysis the business may well never be solved."

He had spoken in a low voice, always without looking at his interlocutor, and it seemed to Maigret that Urbain, his eyebrows wrinkled, was trying in vain to understand what his attitude was hiding.

"You think that the murderer won't be discovered?"

"I don't know anything..."

"I thank you! I took you for a friend, for a comrade, if you prefer. I was wrong, a few moments ago, to expose my heart to you. I'm sorry! You must think that I have no shame..."

"I assure you that I don't!" Maigret insisted. Wouldn't anyone understand that he *couldn't* say anything?

"Go back to your shop. Try to calm yourself down. Avoid getting yourself into a similar state. If you're questioned, answer as you judge fit. For my part, I've forgotten everything you've said to me..."

But he knew that a man never forgives another after having humiliated himself in front of him, especially in vain! Urbain, who had gradually reacquired his *sang-froid*, endeavored to smile, or rather to laugh.

"You'll surely start to believe that love can drive someone insane, won't you?" he made a show of joking.

"I've seen worse!" Maigret retorted. "You really won't have something?"

"Thanks, but as you said a little while ago, my shop must be crowded. It's my job to serve the drinks, isn't it? And to make the fourth when one is missing. Good evening, Mister Superintendent!"

He had hardly disappeared when Mme Maigret, who completely forgot her usual discretion, intervened. "He looked like he'd been crying." And, as her husband didn't answer, she was annoyed in her turn.

"You've sworn not to open your mouth, is that it? And you'll sit here all day long letting it eat away at you? You know, I'm starting to wonder what you're hiding."

Maigret smiled, ironically. "In fact, you're right, it might be me who killed the poor butcher!"

"Don't act so smart. I'm not talking about the crime, but about the visit of that girl..."

"No, spare me! Not jealousy..."

"Why not?"

"Because this is not the occasion for it... Don't you see that it's sad enough already?"

"What's sad?"

"This whole little drama. For it is such a small drama! So petty! So laughable even, when one looks at it closely. Could you ever imagine that an Angèle could drive two sensible men crazy?"

"She's a sort of..."

"...a sort of poor, small girl who carries herself badly, yes! The undernourished kind, with large ringed eyes and pale skin which never saw the sun."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"You're right! That doesn't mean anything! And the proof of it is that for two men, this Angèle was the female ideal incarnate, and could replace any other reason of living. I know that in certain cases, it can create a kind of bewitchment. In a village, with its loneliness, heat, cockroaches, one sees handsome young men, strong and honest, get caught up in a passion for some singer at a greasy spoon and fight among themselves over her..."

"It must be because they don't have anything to compare with..."

"But here! In an honest city in the center of the Loire, a few kilometers from Orléans!"

His wife looked at him, surprised to hear him talk so much, which he seldom did. She didn't dare to interrupt, for fear of stopping him..

"And yet..." he began again. "Wait! Can you tell me why, each evening for more than a year, I left this house at five minutes to five, why a little later I pushed open the door of this *Grand Café*, and why, for the next nearly two hours, I stared seriously, as if my life depended on it, at little pieces of colored paper?"

"It's not because of her?"

"Idiot! I knew you wouldn't understand. I called it 'bewitchment'. Well, it's also... a kind of mania, if you prefer, a need that is created when one has nothing else to do..."

It was the first time that he had risked an allusion to his retirement, but not the first time that Mme Maigret had thought of it.

"You go there once, twice... Then, one fine day, you feel lost if, for some reason or another, the game doesn't take place... One gets used to certain faces, certain jokes... One has 'his' chair, 'his' deck of cards..."

It was not for her that he spoke, but for himself. Since the morning, since the day before, it had fermented in him, and it was a relief to give free course to his nausea.

"That's where you get to! But the question remains, why don't other men, under the same circumstances, fall under the spell of the sweet young thing, and end up regarding her as the center of their lives?"

"I remember the reactions of people at the time of those "crimes of passion", when I was still with the Criminal Investigation Department. I'd show them a photograph of a woman, and almost always they'd protest, "But she's not even beautiful! How could someone have been able to kill for her?"

"But the heroines of passion dramas are never beautiful! It's a more subtle poison. When Urbain saw one among us looking at this girl without thinking of her, he suffered as much as if he had been struck with cancer... The idea that the butcher... Are you beginning to understand?"

"He killed him?" Mme Maigret had the misfortune had to utter in her innocence.

"You too, you always go back to that? Is that the only thing which interests you, you and all the others? Blood! Mystery! Someone killed! Killed! Killed! But, my God, don't you see that there's something else to life? I'm trying to explain a differently painful drama and you ask me who killed..."

"Can't you try to imagine this end of the street, close to the bridge, the *Grand Café* with, in summer, its terrace and its bay-trees in green barrels; opposite the red gate of the butcher shop..."

"On one side, the wife of the butcher, who is in the shop all day and who, from time to time, comes to the doorway to check on her kid playing in the street. On other side, another woman, sad and unwell, and a child, and a man who thinks only of one thing: *Angèle!*"

"This *Angèle* who is not beautiful, who probably has no passion and whose small body is without charm! The fact remains that the butcher and his neighbor turn round and round, like horses of a merry-go-round, around a single idea, both eaten up with jealousy, watching each other, threatening each other with a glance which sees nothing else in the world..."

"Do you get it, now?"

And Mme Maigret answered, "I understand that men are stupid, if that's what you wanted to explain to me. Only, now, what will happen? Will he be arrested?"

Then Maigret, suddenly angry, rose and went up to his room, slamming his door violently and, for no reason, giving a turn of the key.

He didn't reappear until dinnertime and was not in a better mood. However, he asked suspiciously, "No one came?"

"No!"

"Ah!"

"You were waiting for someone?"

"Me? No! What an idea!"

He had spent hours discouraging people from calling on him, but he didn't seem any less upset in noting that he had succeeded.

"You're going out after dinner?"

"Why would I go out?"

"I don't know... I thought..."

He didn't go out. The next morning, he left to go fishing early, carrying a snack, and returned only at four in the afternoon, with a rather beautiful pike and a frying pan of perch.

"The burial will be tomorrow morning..." his wife announced to him.
"Shall I go there with you?"

"Why not?"

"In the newspaper, they seem to believe it was a crime of a prowler... There's not a word on this Angèle..."

"And?"

"Nothing... I thought..."

"One shouldn't think..."

He didn't go out any more than the day before. The following day, dressed in his black suit and accompanied by Mme Maigret, he attended the burial of the butcher and went to the cemetery. Twice he noticed his colleague Gabrielli trying to catch his eye, but he always pretended to be occupied.

Urbain was there, with Citroën. Angèle, also, huddled in a dark corner of the church to attend the service.

"Won't you stop at the café with them?"

There was a pale sun. Men were entering the *Grand Café* to take aperitifs and to discuss the event a little more. Maigret preferred to return home and, for eight days, he was taken with a true frenzy of fishing; then he decided to fix up his boat, drew it up onto the bank, on the grass of the slope, and worked there during several days more, eternally smeared with tar and paint.

"You know that they seem to be giving up the investigation?"

"How's that supposed to concern me?"

"It seemed to me..."

As always happens, once he had his boat spruced up he didn't feel like fishing any more, and as the weather was very warm and the first scent of lilacs filled the bottom of the garden, he spent his time there reading Fouché's *Mémoires*.

"How come you don't go back to your game in the evenings? That used to keep you distracted..."

He didn't answer. But these simple allusions clouded his mood.

One day, his wife announced to him, "They're going to sell the butcher shop. The butcher's widow received a hundred thousand francs from the insurance and she'll go to live with her sister in Orléans..."

No reaction, still in his mood, and it took weeks and weeks before Maigret became himself again.

One day he went out for a walk and didn't return till around eight o'clock in the evening, and Mme Maigret remarked, "You're back late..."

"I was playing backgammon..." he acknowledged.

"At the *Grand Café*?"

"No, at the *Commerce*... With the new butcher."

"Why won't you ever tell me what really happened?"

"Because!"

"Even now? I can't learn the truth yet?"

"No!"

That summer they decided to visit Savoie, where they hardly did anything, as Mme Maigret wasn't much for walking.

CHAPTER FOUR

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It was three years later, at about the same time, for the lilacs were starting to flower. Maigret, in clogs, was picking tender green lettuce, when his wife opened the letter-box and found a death announcement.

"Well! She actually died..." she announced.

"Who?"

"The wife of the *Grand Café*... Mme Urbain. The dairy woman told me that for three months, she hadn't been able to swallow anything but milk. You'll have to go by and deposit your card..."

Maigret went there that same evening, stayed a few moments in the chapel, where Angèle sniffled in a corner. Two days later, they went up to the cemetery, and returned arm in arm, in ideal weather which didn't leave any room for somber thoughts.

"This reminds me of one of the worst periods of my life..." he started, out of the blue, without having been asked anything.

Mme Maigret, this time, was clever enough to say nothing and continue walking, for the couple had given up the road to return by the edge of the Loire.

"I don't know if you remember about the butcher... I understood it all, from the first moments, and even, I might say, from the moment when they came to announce the news to me. However, what I knew, I couldn't say... It was a question of honesty, of honesty with respect to a death..."

Mme Maigret had automatically picked a daisy, which she held in her hand, like in a picture by a painter whose name Maigret had forgotten. They went slowly, drawing aside tall grasses on their way, thistles clinging to the trousers of the former superintendent.

"What had struck me was the awkward insistence of the butcher to tell us that he had so much pocket money... Like the majority of provincial tradesmen, he had remained faithful to his purse... He had it stuffed with money, with small tickets and dirty papers, in the pocket of his trousers, and I remember his gesture on taking it out, lifting up his apron."

"But that evening he started off by taking out his wallet and opening it... Plenty of time to let to us see that it was full. But, the astonishing thing was,

I had impression that if there were really a thousand franc note on the top of the bundle, below it there was only paper..."

"So this visit to the notary..."

"When they came to tell me that he'd been killed I said to myself that the coincidence was far too strange. For I've never yet seen anyone killed at precisely the time when they expected it..."

"The first thing I confirmed was that though the notes had indeed disappeared, the empty wallet had been put back into the pocket of the dead man."

"No one killed him?" Mme Maigret was astonished.

"Certainly not! And the poor fellow didn't even have the sense to make a proper suicide. He did it like an amateur. If someone other than that Gabrielli had been sent to lead the official investigation, they would have realized it soon enough. But Gabrielli, who's a charming boy, is stronger at Russian billiards than police matters..."

He smiled and they went on a ways.

"And that's why I couldn't say anything. That's the reason I didn't want to hear the confidences of all those people. But they came nevertheless, whining or begging..."

"I still don't understand why he did it."

"Because he was a poor idiot, capable of the best and the worst. Insane for this girl, he'd begged her to leave with him, and, if she'd accepted, he'd have dumped his wife and son without any remorse. He wouldn't have even have thought of them."

"Besides, he'd already started to ruin things, initially by not taking care of his business, or running things poorly, then by making Angèle gifts which she couldn't use, for she couldn't let them be seen by Urbain..."

"When she told him that she didn't want to see him anymore, he decided to kill himself. And, in his grief, he became more sensitive to the misfortune of others..."

"I am sure that it was at that moment that he thought of his wife and son. He realized that they were going to be put in a very bad situation... and so as long as he was going to die, he might as well make it serve some purpose."

"And that's why he'd taken out the insurance, and why there couldn't be any question of suicide, and for this reason the imbecile spoke to us with

such insistence about the notary and showed us his wallet so obligingly..."

"I never thought of that..." said Mme Maigret. "I always wondered why you'd let a guilty person go free..."

"Others had to wonder too, more especially as Urbain, by blind chance, actually didn't have an alibi. When he told me that while crying in anguish, I'd thought I was going to have to reveal the truth to prevent him from going to prison..."

"What would you have had me do? It hurt me to think of that poor devil of a butcher dying for nothing. And as I don't belong to the police force any more, and I'm not in the pay of the insurance companies..."

He stopped, squinting because of the sun, and contemplated the landscape brightened by the murmuring water of the Loire.

"Anyway, I'm glad that it's over, he sighed. I didn't like it..."

"And you never told anyone?"

"No one!"

"Not even Urbain?"

"No!"

"Nor Angèle?"

He couldn't refrain a smile.

"Jealous?"

"Oh no! But when I see those men now... So, this bewitchment you spoke to me about once, it can come about stupidly, out of habit, say, because a girl serves an aperitif to you every day at the same time?"

He continued to smile, relieved to have been able to tell his story to someone. More especially as, now, it was finished! The wife of the butcher, in Orléans, had remarried, to an employee of the Water Service, that the kid called his uncle. His mourning finished, Urbain would no doubt marry Angèle. Today, the café was closed, with a small placard bordered in black on the shutter.

Everyone had left Mme Urbain all alone at the cemetery and returned to town shaking off the last funereal scents of incense which clung to their shoulders.

"Would you be able to do that yourself?" Mme Maigret asked suddenly, as they were about to reach the alley at the edge of the river which led to the wall of their garden.

"Able to do what?"

"I don't know... everything... like them..."

"You see, no one should ever tell anything to a woman!" he joked, cupping his hands to light his pipe with the flame of a match. And he asked automatically, "What's for lunch? I'm starving!"

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